02/28/24 BIG TECH

The Government Really Is Spying on You — and It's Legal + More

The Defender's Big Brother NewsWatch brings you the latest headlines related to governments' abuse of power, including attacks on democracy, civil liberties and use of mass surveillance. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By The Defender Staff

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The Government Really Is Spying on You — and It's Legal

Politico reported:

> The freakout moment that set journalist Byron Tau on a five-year quest to expose the sprawling U.S. data surveillance state occurred over a "wine-soaked dinner" back in 2018 with a source he cannot name.
>
> The tipster told Tau the government was buying up reams of consumer data — information scraped from cellphones, social media profiles, internet ad exchanges and other open sources — and deploying it for often-clandestine purposes like law enforcement and national security in the U.S. and abroad. The places you go, the websites you visit, the opinions you post — all collected and legally sold to federal agencies.
>
> In his new book, Means of Control, Tau details everything he's learned since

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that dinner: An opaque network of government contractors is peddling troves of data, a legal but shadowy use of American citizens' information that troubles even some of the officials involved. And attempts by Congress to pass privacy protections fit for the digital era have largely stalled, though reforms to a major surveillance program are now being debated.

"Any nightmare use for data you can think of will probably eventually happen," Tau said. "It might not happen immediately, but it'll happen eventually."

Judge: LAPD Officers Fired Over COVID Vaccine Dispute Won't Get Jobs Back

Los Angeles Times reported:

A Los Angeles police officer who was fired in 2022 after challenging the city's COVID-19 vaccination and testing mandate is entitled to back pay but should not get her job restored, an L.A. County judge has ruled.

L.A. County Superior Court Judge Mitchell L. Beckloff said police department officials denied the former officer, Natalie Stringer, her right to respond to allegations prior to a disciplinary meeting, but the city did not violate labor laws and acted within its rights when she was terminated based on her "failure to comply with a valid condition of employment."

Beckloff made similar findings in the cases of several other police officers and firefighters who were terminated over their vaccination status, the latest rebuff of challenges to the city's coronavirus protocols.

Greg Yacoubian, a lawyer representing Stringer along with four other officers and two firefighters who sued the city over their vaccine protocol-related firings, said he will appeal the ruling.

Kentucky Bill Bars COVID Vaccination Mandates in Certain Situations, Citing Risk of Adverse Events

WUKY reported:

Kentuckians seeking employment, medical treatment, or enrolling as a student could not be required to receive COVID-19 or mRNA vaccinations under a new bill filed this week. Senate Bill 295, filed by Smithfield Senator Lindsey Tichenor, is being billed as a medical freedom measure.

In a statement, Tichenor argues Kentucky citizens were "forced to make compromising health decisions in order to retain their employment, gain access to medical treatment, or to enroll in schools during the response to the pandemic." The bill would block compulsory COVID or mRNA-based vaccinations in those instances.

The lawmaker goes on to call the vaccines "ineffective" and "dangerous."

The largest study to date of COVID vaccine safety looked at nearly 100 million vaccinated people across eight countries. The World Health Organization's Global Vaccine Data Network examined 13 medical conditions, including myocarditis, convulsion, and Guillain-Barré syndrome — and found elevated risks associated with the vaccines.

Federal Court Dismisses Case Against Iowa Governor's Ban on School Mask Mandates

Associated Press reported:

A federal court on Tuesday dismissed a legal challenge to Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds' policy prohibiting schools from instituting mask requirements,

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which was brought by families of students with disabilities during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ruling marks the conclusion of the yearslong court battle, originating in the fall of 2021 with a lawsuit alleging that Reynolds violated federal disability law by preventing schools from adopting mask mandates as an accommodation for students with disabilities.

Reynolds celebrated the result, saying in a statement that Iowa focused on keeping kids in the classroom, "trusting parents to decide what was best for their children."

"While children were the least vulnerable, they paid the highest price for COVID lockdowns and mandates, but Iowa was a different story," she said.

WordPress and Tumblr Plan to Sell User Content to AI Companies

Gizmodo reported:

Automattic, the parent company of sites like WordPress and Tumblr, is in talks to sell content from its platforms to AI companies like MidJourney and OpenAIfor training purposes, according to a new report from 404 Media Tuesday. And while the details of the deal are still sketchy, Automattic is trying to reassure users they can opt-out at any time.

404 reports there's conflict within Automattic as some of the content that was being scraped for the AI companies included private content not intended to be saved by the company. To complicate matters even further, advertising content that isn't even owned by Automattic, including ads from an old Apple Music campaign, has also reportedly made its way into the training data set.

The plans at Automattic have been so controversial internally, that a product manager has even started pulling his own photos off Tumblr to make sure they're not used to train AI, according to 404.

Facebook Whistleblower Calls Canada's Online Harms Bill 'One of the Best Proposed Today'

CTV News reported:

Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee who blew the whistle on the tech company by accusing it of prioritizing profit over public safety, says Canada's new online harms legislation isn't just good, it's "one of the best bills that has been proposed today."

In an interview with CTV News Channel's Power Play host Vassy Kapelos on Tuesday, Haugen said the new bill is a meaningful step toward holding tech companies accountable for neglecting user well-being, especially among children and teens.

"We know the platforms know this is a problem but different platforms are taking different levels of effort to try to deal with this," Haugen told Kapelos. "And that's why we need laws like the Canadian online safety bill, to make sure Canadian researchers can ask questions (like) is the platform your kid is spending time on doing everything they can to keep that kid safe?"

"It's less a bill that says, 'You must take down every last dangerous thing,'" Haugen said. "It's a bill that says, 'If you know there are risks, you have to tell us, you can't lie about it, and you need to tell us what your plan is for mitigating those risks, and you need to give us enough information that we know you're making progress.'"

United Now Offers TSA PreCheck Facial Recognition at O'Hare and LAX

Business Traveler reported:

> United Airlines passengers with TSA PreCheck can now skate through security at Chicago's O'Hare (ORD) and Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) simply by scanning their faces, as the airline joins rivals in using TSA's new facial recognition systems.
>
> As first spotted by The Points Guy, United's website states it is now offering "TSA PreCheck Touchless ID" at the two hubs, the fourth and fifth busiest airports in the U.S. The technology allows enrolled travelers to verify their identity at the airport by scanning their faces rather than presenting their boarding passes and IDs.
>
> Even more futuristic developments are coming to airports soon. In November, the Department of Homeland Security, the parent agency of TSA, announced that self-screening pods are in the works for U.S. airports. These kiosks will harness facial recognition and automated gates and baggage conveyance systems to process travelers with little or no assistance from staff. The self-screening kiosks are being trialed at Harry Reid International Airport in Las Vegas (LAS).

Canada's Vaccine Passport, ArriveCan, Faces Major Investigations

Reclaim the Net reported:

> Over last week's end, Canadian Information Commissioner, Caroline Maynard, announced the inception of a probe into claims of the obliteration of federal government records surrounding the government's controversial vaccine passport app, ArriveCan.
>
> ArriveCAN is a mobile application that was initially launched in April 2020 as a tool to assist border guards in Canada. It was designed to determine if people were eligible to enter Canada and whether they met strict COVID-19 requirements.
>
> The app became mandatory for all air travelers seven months later and was expanded to include those crossing the border by land in March 2021. It collects personal data such as name, telephone number, address, and vaccination status to help public health officials enforce government quarantine rules.
>
> Aside from the obvious constitutional concerns, there was much debate among experts about whether the app's requirement for travelers to remain in their homes, especially following a glitch that incorrectly notified thousands of fully vaccinated travelers to quarantine, could be a form of unlawful detention.
>
> The ArriveCan app, which was originally budgeted at $80,000, has seen its costs balloon to over $60 million. The public backlash against the invasive and dictatorial app resulted in a major investigation into the app. But now, the focal point of this investigation is the destruction of documentation associated with the creation of the ArriveCan app and its principal contractor, GC Strategies.

TikTok's 'Mystery Virus' Is a Pandemic Side Effect

The Hill reported:

> Fear of a "mystery virus" is spreading through social media platforms such as TikTok, with young people saying they're not testing positive for COVID-19, flu or RSV, but sharing symptoms of nausea, faintness and excess mucus.

Public health experts say these concerns are likely a sign of one post-pandemic condition: anxiety about getting sick.

In the past few weeks, social media users have posted online about their experiences with COVID-like symptoms including difficulty breathing, extreme fatigue and fever. Many videos show people expressing their confusion as they say tests for viruses including COVID-19, the flu and RSV come back negative.

Lori Freeman, CEO of the National Association of County and City Health Officials, said these unverified online concerns of a "mystery virus" are another indication that trust in governmental and public health authorities is still lagging.

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